

Chapter 5

Brooklyn Barr POV:

The sweet, clear notes of a string quartet began to play Pachelbel's Canon, the sound echoing through the small, wood-and-glass chapel. I stood just outside the open doors, my hand tucked into the arm of a kind, steady man. The man I was about to marry.

"Aspen?" Kaden's voice shrieked through the phone, a sound of pure, unadulterated panic. "What the hell are you doing in Aspen? The wedding is in Miami!"

"I know," I said calmly. I turned my head slightly, letting the phone catch the sound of the crisp mountain wind and the gentle melody floating from the chapel. "Listen."

There was a choked sound on the other end of the line. He heard it. The music. The wind. The truth.

"Why?" he choked out. "Why would you go there? I told you we changed it!"

"You didn't tell me, Kaden. You decided," I corrected him gently. "You decided for me. You decided for Annmarie."

"But... I did it for us! It was supposed to be a surprise! A romantic, fun, incredible surprise!" he babbled, his voice cracking. "I can't believe you don't appreciate it."

"A surprise for who, Kaden?" I asked, my patience finally gone. "Was it a surprise for Annmarie when you bought her a fifty-thousand-dollar dress? Was it a surprise for her when you booked a venue based on her preferences?"

Silence. A dead, damning silence.

"I have to go now, Kaden," I said, my voice softening just a fraction. "My wedding is about to start."

"Our wedding!" he screamed.

"No," I said. "Mine."

And with a final, liberating breath, I ended the call. I turned to my friend, my maid of honor, and handed her my phone.

"Turn it off," I said. "Please."

She nodded, her eyes full of a fierce, protective understanding.

My groom, Dr. Joel Sanchez, squeezed my hand. "Are you ready?" he asked, his dark, kind eyes searching mine. ☺

I looked at him, at the man who had seen my scars and called them beautiful, who remembered from a college hiking club ten years ago that I disliked the cold and had brought a cashmere wrap for me without being asked. The man who, when I had called him in a tearful, broken mess three weeks ago and impulsively asked him to marry me, had simply said, "I've been waiting for you to ask." ☺

"I'm ready," I said, and this time, it was the absolute truth.

Kaden Blankenship POV:

The line went dead.

I stared at my phone, the silence a roaring in my ears. I called back. Straight to voicemail. Again. Voicemail.

A strangled sob escaped my lips. My chest felt like it was collapsing. Tears, hot and shameful, streamed down my face. She was in Aspen. Getting married. To who? Who the hell could it be?

It hit me then, a realization so painful it felt like a physical impact. She wasn't just moody. She wasn't having jitters. She was angry. Genuinely, deeply, volcanically angry. And I hadn't even noticed.

"Kaden?" My mother's voice was sharp. "What is it? What did she say?"

I couldn't speak. I just shook my head, the tears blurring the sight of the stupid, expensive floral arrangements.

Chace pushed through the small crowd of family. He took one look at my face and swore under his breath.

"She did it," he said, a note of awe in his voice. "The absolute madwoman, she actually did it."

"Did what?" my father demanded.

"I warned him," Chace said, looking at me with something that might have been pity. "I told him not to play with fire. You don't just change the venue on a woman like Brooklyn and not tell her. You don't parade your... your friend... around like a prize." He ran a hand through his hair. "I saw her, a few weeks ago. At a bridal shop. She was with some guy. Laughing. I thought it was weird. I guess she was planning her own wedding all along."

My mother gasped. My father's face turned thunderous.

"Go get her," he ordered, his voice a low growl. "Get on a plane and go get your fiancée back right now."

I looked around wildly, my mind a mess of panic and confusion. I grabbed Annmarie's hand, clinging to it like a lifeline. "Come with me," I begged. "You have to come with me. You can explain. Tell her it was all a misunderstanding."

Annmarie pulled her hand back as if she'd been burned. Her face, usually a mask of sweet vulnerability, was pinched and annoyed.

"Are you kidding me?" she snapped. "I'm not flying to Aspen. It's freezing there! You heard what the doctor said about my asthma."

"This isn't about your asthma!" I cried, desperation making my voice high and thin. "This is about my life! She's my bride!"

"Then you should have thought of that before you decided to build your whole wedding around my comfort," she retorted, crossing her arms. "This is your mess, Kaden. You fix it."

She turned on her heel and walked away, leaving me standing alone in the wreckage of my own making.



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